

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-06

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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3358

DIA

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

USCINCEUR

USINT BAGHDAD

S E C R E T BEIRUT 3256

LIMDIS

NOFORN

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS PGOV LE

SUBJ: SECURITY SITUATION IN LEBANON

REF: BEIRUT 3203

SUMMARY: COMPROMISE SOLUTION FORESEEN REFTEL BETWEEN GO
AND SUNNI-LEFTIST LEADERS WHO HAVE BEEN AGITATING FIERCELY OVER
RECENT EVENTS IN SIDON WAS AGREED UPON IN COUNCIL OF MINISTERS
MEETING MAR 12. WE EXPECT THIS WILL HELP CONFESSIONAL ANIMO-
SITIES TO SUBSIDE AND ENABLE SOLH CABINET TO CONTINUE IN OFFICE,
AT LEAST FOR TIME BEING. END SUMMARY.

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1. AS FORESEEN REFTTEL, LEBANESE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MAR 12 AGREED TO REFER SUNNI-LEFTIST DEMANDS FOR REORGANIZATION OF ARMY COMMAND TO SPECIAL CABINET COMMITTEE FOR STUDY. AT SAME TIME, CABINET CHARGED ECONOMY MINISTER ABBAS KHALAF WITH SATISFYING DEMANDS OF SIDON'S FISHERMEN, AND PRES FRANGIE AND PRIME MINISTER SOLH REPORTEDLY HAVE DECIDED TO TRANSFER COMMANDER OF ARMY'S SOUTHERN DISTRICT AND HIS INTELLIGENCE OFFER TO "OTHER POSTS". AS RESULT OF THESE STEPS, SOLH CABINET WILL CONTINUE IN OFFICE, CONFESSIONAL TENSIONS WILL PROBABLY BE EASED SOMEWHAT, AND THERE IS SPECULATION THAT GENERAL STRIKE STILL IN PROGRESS IN SIDON WILL SOON BE CALLED OFF BY "ARMED ELEMENTS" WHO CONTROL THAT CITY.

2. RE SITUATION IN SIDON, FURTHER DETAILS PROVIDED BY LEBANESE ARMY (BRIG KANAAN) ON ROLE PLAYED BY FEDAYEEN DURING PAST TWO WEEKS ARE PARTICULARLY REVEALING. KANAAN STATES THAT ALTHOUGH PLO'S ABU ZA'IM AND ABU HASSAN--ACTING ON ORDERS FROM 'ARAFAT AND FATAH'S ABU JIHAD--ATTEMPTED TO ASSASSINATE GOL OFFICIALS IN "NEGOTIATING" WITH ABU SALEH AND OTHER "ARMED ELEMENTS" IN SIDON, THEIR EFFORTS HAVE NOT BEEN PARTICULARLY SUCCESSFUL. (KANAAN TENDS BELIEVE, DESPITE FACT THAT ARMY PICKED UP FATAH RADIO COMMUNICATIONS URGING ABU SALEH AND HIS ASSOCIATES TO COOPERATE WITH GOL, THAT PLO LEADERSHIP HAS BEEN PLAYING DOUBLE GAME--I.E., PRETENDING TO COOPERATE WITH GOL WHILE PRIVATELY DOING LITTLE OR NOTHING TO REDUCE FEDAYEEN OCCUPATION OF SIDON. HE THINKS THAT 'ARAFAT, HAVING BEEN FILLED FULL OF SCARE STORIES RE AN IMPENDING LEBANESE ARMY ATTEMPT TO "LIQUIDATE" FEDAYEEN PRESENCE BY SOVIET OFFICIALS--INCLUDING AMB SOLDATOV--IN RECENT WEEKS, WAS ANXIOUS TO SEE ARMY'S ABILITY TO CONFRONT FEDAYEEN FURTHER CIRCUMSCRIBED BY SIDON CLASHES AND CONFESSIONAL/POLITICAL TURMOIL THAT HE EXPECTED WOULD ENSUE FROM THEM.

3. ACCORDING TO KANAAN, GOL AND ARMY LEADERSHIP NEVER ENTERTAINED ANY INTENTION OF "SMASHING" FEDAYEEN IN SIDON, SINCE THEY KNEW FULL WELL THAT SUCH MOVE WOULD PROVOKE ALL-OUT CONFRONTATION WITH FEDAYEEN AND
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THEIR LEBANESE SYMPATHIZERS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. NEVERTHELESS, LATTER WERE QUICK TO PORTRAY ARMY'S MAR 1 ACTION AS INITIAL GOL STEP TO PROVOKE JUST SUCH A CONFRONTATION, THEREBY SUCCESSFULLY POLARIZING AND INFLAMING SUNNI-CHRISTIAN PASSIONS FURTHER--SO SUCCESSFULLY, IN FACT, THAT MANY SUNNIS IN SIDON HAVE BEEN OPENLY REFERRING TO FEDAYEEN AS "OUR ARMY", WHILE CHRISTIAN GROUPS HAVE BEEN DEMONSTRATING IN SUPPORT OF "OUR (LEBANESE) ARMY".

4. ONE MURKY ASPECT IN ALL THE FOREGOING IS ROLE PLAYED BY SYRIA. WE NOTE REPORTS IN OTHER CHANNELS THAT SARG HAD COUNSELLED SA'IQA FORCES IN LEBANON TO WITHDRAW FROM SIDON AREA AND AVOID TROUBLE WITH LEBANESE ARMY. WE NOTE OTHER REPORTS IN SAME CHANNELS, HOWEVER, THAT SA'IQA LEADERS ZOHAYR AND MAJID MUHSEN WERE NOT OVERLY CAREFUL TO COMPLY WITH THESE INSTRUCTIONS, AND KANAAN CATEGORICALLY INSISTS THAT SA'IQA ELEMENTS TOOK PART IN CLASHES IN AND OCCUPATION OF SIDON. (BOTH PLO AND SA'IQA UNITS PLAYED HIGHLY VISIBLE ROLE IN MAR 7 FUNERAL PROCESSION FOR MAAROUF SAAD IN SIDON.) KANAAN SUSPECTS, BUT CANNOT PROVE OR FIGURE OUT PRECISELY WHY, SARG MAY ALSO HAVE ENCOURAGED SIDON CLASHES IN ORDER TO FOMENT WIDER DISTURBANCES IN LEBANON.

5. COMMENT: ALTHOUGH SOME DEGREE OF NORMAL LIFE MAY RETURN TO SIDON AS LEBANESE CONFESSIONAL AND POLITICAL TENSIONS SUBSIDE, FEDAYEEN FROM REPORTS APPEAR TO BE SHOWING SOME RELUCTANCE TO ALLOW THAT CITY TO REVERT TO FULL GOL CONTROL. AS NOTED REFTTEL, LEBANESE ARMY'S ABILITY TO CORRECT THIS SITUATION HAS BEEN SIGNIFICANTLY DIMINISHED BY EVENTS OF PAST TWO WEEKS.
GODLEY

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